

Obama's doublespeak on education reform



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President Barack Obama had been getting high marks in his first year in office for what seemed to be an insightful approach to education reform. Too bad he flunked the final.

Give Obama credit for what he got right. Somewhere along the line, perhaps during his stint as a community organizer, he figured out the three great truths about our mediocre public schools: They're plagued by low expectations; they exist for the benefit of the adults who work there, not the students; and many teachers will resist, with every fiber of their being, taking responsibility for what students are learning because they know it wouldn't reflect well on them.

His "Race to the Top" initiative, which would evaluate teachers based on student performance and reward those states and school districts that practice innovative approaches to educating students, is a major step in the right direction.

Yet, unfortunately — in light of recent public statements and administration's plans to water down the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind education reform law — it's clear he still has a lot to learn about what's broken in schools and how to fix it.

Real reformers should know better than to pursue incompatible agendas. You can't serve the interests of students and parents by demanding accountability from public schools and then turn around and pander to teachers unions by dismantling NCLB, which holds them accountable.

Real reformers should not be so quick to fault previous attempts to improve schools just because they came from the other side of the aisle — i.e., NCLB, a law considered President George W. Bush's top domestic accomplishment — especially when they're proposing a reform plan that bears some resemblance to what they are criticizing.

Real reformers should not lament educators who "teach to the test" — as Obama did in response to a question during a town hall meeting in Nashua, N.H. — while pursuing an agenda that would rely heavily on

testing to see what students know and who taught it to them.

Real reformers should not sound the alarm about the urgency of the educational crisis and then quietly push back the date by which students are supposed to be performing at grade level in math and reading. The administration wants to do away with the target date of 2014 for bringing every child to academic proficiency.

This isn't just wrongheaded, it's dangerous. For one thing, there goes the accountability, even if critics insist the goal was never realistic to begin with. Look at how Fortune 500 companies do things. They often set goals that are — by design — unrealistic. Then they run as fast as they can toward them. The idea is to never give up.

The same principle should apply to anyone who is truly committed to education reform. For a while, it looked as though Obama was solidly in this camp. But now, because of his double-talk, we can't be sure.

The president should worry about implementing his own education reform measure and keep his hands off No Child Left Behind. He should suppress his partisan impulses and accept that Republicans have some good ideas such as holding public schools accountable. He should stand up to teachers unions and call them out for what they are: part of the problem rather than part of the solution. He should declare war on low expectations in the classroom and continue efforts to link teacher pay to student performance. And he should not let up on the pressure until he gets results.

Above all, he should make up his mind whether he wants to go down in history as someone who tried to make the schools better and make good on the promise of a quality education for all students, or whether he just wants to join the list of Democratic presidents who settled for making things comfortable for the teachers unions that help bankroll their party.

For once, he should stop trying to be all things to all people. Just be an advocate for an overlooked and powerless group that really needs one: public school students.

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